

Giving back to the community Westpac Chopper Swim 2019



By Dai (David) Williams

We have all seen the Auckland Westpac Rescue Chopper flying past at some stage, but did you know that they fly over a thousand missions every year? That means thousands of lives saved. There are many reasons why they are called out. One lady was run over by a horse, many are the result of accidents on our roads, and some are when people get into difficulty in the water.

Running an organisation like the Auckland Rescue Helicopter Trust (ARHT) is expensive and many people volunteer their time and money to support the trust.

This is where an idea dreamt up over a coffee, by a few long-distance swimmers, started an event that now draws swimmers from as far away as Perth. The concept was simple. The swimmers start at Matiatia Bay on Waiheke Island and swim to Mechanics Bay in Auckland. The swimmers

are not charged an entry fee, but they do have to make a commitment to raise funds for ARHT.

Organising something like this is simple right? Maybe not! The swim is over 20 km and there are a few potential hazards like ships along the way. It also takes quite a long time to swim 20 km, so the swimmers need food to eat and fluids to keep them going.

Founder and organiser Olaf Adam realised early on that he needed a sound risk management plan and the right resources to support the swimmers. The most obvious resources were kayakers and people with boats capable of picking up swimmers in need.

Slightly complicating matters was the need to accommodate teams of swimmers and solo swimmers. The teams have always had to make their own arrangements for a support boat and a kayaker.

Making arrangements for a support boat and a kayaker is not easy for a solo swimmer to organise, especially if they are not from Auckland. This is where a number of Yakity Yak kayakers have made a great contribution. I believe that Peter Beadle was the first one to help. He was followed by a string of other kayakers including Richard Saysell, Shaun Maclaren, Greg Dunning, Renee Olivier, Neil Watson and Annette Mitchell.

That support grew to the point where Russell and Lorraine Williams organised a Yakity Yak trip to Waiheke to coincide with 2019's Westpac Chopper Swim. What a great initiative! The kayakers have a nice weekend out on the Gulf and the swim participants get support from knowledgeable and experienced kayakers.

An added bonus with this arrangement was Auckland Canoe & Kayak providing use of a kayak trailer free-of-charge. We used the trailer to transport a number of kayakers across to Waiheke on the day before the swim.



Russell and Lorraine supported Ian Jones and his team.



There were also some great stories. My favorite is about a delightful chap called Karim. Karim had polio as a child and he grew up in Afghanistan. Not exactly the sort of background for a solo swimmer in a 20 km ocean swim. Think again! He participated as member of a two-person team in 2018. The organisers paired Greg Dunning up with Karim's team as their support kayaker. Greg obviously made a great impression because Karim called Greg in advance of the 2019 swim to be his support kayaker.

Neil Watson was another person who received a call direct from one of the swimmers – Denise Clarke. Denise used the swim as a practice for an even bigger challenge; swimming the English Channel.

Olaf Adam, Founder and Organiser says, "As we have seen in past events, conditions can be challenging. Strong winds and choppy swells can make life very difficult, particularly for the support kayakers. Having a core group of experienced and highly capable kayakers makes a huge difference. They know the Gulf like the back of their hands and can handle whatever is thrown at them - that's a real comfort for me."

"Their advice is grounded on decades of paddling these waters. We're a very young event and are still learning. Having these guys with



Karim Rostami and Greg Dunning at the finish line

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Denise Clarke and Neil Watson enjoying a well deserved ice-cream at the end.

- ### Highlights from the 2019 Chopper Challenge Swim.
- 32 solo swimmers
 - 18 teams of swimmers
 - 58 kayakers
 - Over \$160,000 raised in 2019
 - Over \$360,000 raised since 2016

their combined experience on the Team makes a huge difference for everyone involved.”

“I can’t thank the crew enough and hope they’ll keep coming back.”

Russell Williams made these comments from his perspective as a corporate sponsor, kayaker and past Canoe & Kayak business owner. “The Auckland Rescue Helicopter Trust service is an essential part of the safety net that as a kayaker and someone involved in the kayak business I rely on. I am very happy to support the Trust in any way I can and will continue to support this event. It is very re-assuring to know that when you really need help there is somebody there to give assistance and save your life.”

ARHT Events Manager Leanda Hunt says, as with previous years, “The Westpac Chopper Swim 2019 continues to be the perfect example of what can be achieved when many kind-hearted Kiwis come together for a good cause. The shared passion for ocean swimming, adventure, and the work of the Westpac Rescue Helicopter are so clearly evident on the day and it’s lovely to be a part of this “buzz”. The swimmers have an



There was even a Yakkity Yak swimmer this year.

Pam Henry on her way to the start.

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ANNUAL APPEAL

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ARHT



Auckland Rescue Helicopter Trust

awesome crew of loved ones around them which, ultimately, helps our rescue crews play their part in the life of our community too. We are very grateful for every single person involved including our own team of volunteers. We are simply blown away by 2019s efforts and the amazing fundraising result. A big 'Thank You' and 'Well Done to all.' 🇳🇿





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